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Echoes of Empowerment: Maya Angelou's Autobiographical Evolution in Black Feminist Discourse.

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THESIS

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Introduction

An autobiography is a story that is usually written by an author to describe his or her life and personality. Autobiographies are written specifically for readers outside of the author's intimate circle. Autobiographies are frequently written by authors as a way to communicate their narratives, experiences, and ideas to readers. It enables them to consider their lives, communicate their feelings and ideas, and leave a legacy for future generations. Writing an autobiography can also be a therapeutic exercise that aids in self-understanding and helps writers make sense of their own experiences. According to many sociologists and psychologists, autobiographies give the writer the capacity and competence to reconstruct history. There are certain interesting examples of fully revealed autobiographies that are found in the writings of St. Augustine, Sir Osbert Sitwell, Benjamin Franklin, Nelson Mandela, Helen Keller, M. K. Gandhi, Anne Frank, and Maya Angelou.

African Americans have experienced prejudice and discrimination throughout American history. African American writers try to challenge the country's power and literary traditions by denying the assertions of the dominant culture. African Americans can forge their literary traditions without the intellectual filter of whiteness by creating their literature. Drawing on their personal experiences and observations of social dynamics, African American writers have provided insightful analyses of discrimination. Their differing viewpoints are a reflection of the variety of their literary techniques, philosophies, and backgrounds. Through their novels, essays, poetry, and other literary works, well-known African American authors such as Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, and many more have made significant contributions to the conversation about discrimination. Their

voices still have an impact on readers, motivating them to face and resolve historical and contemporary injustices.

Maya Angelou is a celebrated poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. She occupies a significant position in both American literature and black feminist discourse. She provides deep insights into the nuances of race, gender, and identity in the United States through her several volumes of autobiographical works. Moreover, her autobiographies deal with different aspects of her life from childhood to adulthood, exploring the complexities of her experiences as an African-American woman in the United States. Through her powerful storytelling, Angelou shared her journey of overcoming adversity, including racism, trauma, and discrimination, while also celebrating the strength and resilience of the African-American community.

Research Problem

The present research proposes to analyse five autobiographies by Maya Angelou. The research will analyse the condition of black women in 20th-century American society in her autobiographies. It will also explore the autobiographical evolution of Maya Angelou, focusing on how her narratives unveil the intersections of black feminism and the process of healing from trauma. In terms of empowerment, identification, and socio-political agency, how does Maya Angelou's personal story advance and depict black feminist discourse? It has sought to do this through the study of her five autobiographies*: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969), Gather Together in My Name (1974), The Heart of a Woman (1981), All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986),* and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven (2002).*

Review of Literature

Many scholarly articles, research papers, PhD dissertations, and critical companions have examined Maya Angelou's autobiographies throughout their publication. The primary source of this study remains the five autobiographies, and along with that, some significant insights have been utilized from the various other secondary sources. Maya Angelou's writing style has

been discussed and analysed by various literary critics. Some articles are available on online websites that discuss the works of Maya Angelou and give ideas about the selected novels. The researcher has selected five autobiographies of Maya Angelou that are *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together in My Name, The Heart of a Woman, All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, and A Song Flung Up to Heaven.*

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, published in 1969, details her experiences from 1930 to 1944 growing up in the racially divided South, emphasizing the restricted options African Americans faced at this time.

Gather Together in My Name, published in 1974, chronicles her life from 17 to 19, addressing poverty, motherhood, relationships, and identity, showcasing her candid storytelling and grace in confronting societal issues.

Maya Angelou's 1981 memoir, *The Heart of a Woman,* narrates her life from 1957 to 1962, highlighting her involvement in the civil rights movement, relationships, and challenges as a single mother.

All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, published in 1985 in which Maya Angelou explores her experiences in Ghana in the late 1960s and emphasizes the impact of the African diaspora on her identity and sense of self.

Through her poetic prose, Maya Angelou explores themes of justice, resiliency, and identity in her memoir *A Song Flung Up to Heaven,* which details her fight for civil rights from 1964 to 1969.

In “After Black Boy and Dusk of Dawn: Patterns in Recent Black Autobiography” (1978), Albert Stone situates black autobiography for its relevance as a historical, cultural, and psychological investigation concerning Angelou’s first autobiography.

A critical analysis is undertaken by James Robert Saunders in his article “Breaking out of the Cage: The Autobiographical Writings of Maya Angelou” (1991); it refers to the autobiographical elements in Angelou’s poetry, with special reference to the five autobiographies in the sequel.

Enter, the Tribe of Women (1996) by Opal Moore refers to the emerging Black women writers at the beginning of the 21st century regarding Angelou, along with other prominent writers. Another piece of research on a similar track is Clara Bernadette Reshma’s “From Survival to Selfhood: Integration of Self in Maya Angelou” (2007). It considers the autobiographical works of Angelou as portrayals of attaining firm selfhood in American society, prejudiced by racism, sexism, and classism.

Patricia Hill Collins Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment expounds a social critical theory to analyse various intersecting factors that inhibit the growth and development of African American females. Christine Etherington Wright's Gender, Profession, and Discourse: Early Twentieth-Century Women's Autobiography provides a deep insight into the interrelatedness of gender and professions and its reflections in modern women's autobiographies.

Objectives:

The present research proposes to work towards the fulfillment of the following objectives:

1. Investigate the intersectionality of race, gender, and other social factors in Angelou's writings.
2. Identify key moments or periods that indicated shifts in her understanding and expression of empowerment.
3. Identify and analyse feminist themes embedded in Angelou's autobiographical works.
4. Examine any critiques or challenges that Angelou may present to mainstream feminist ideologies.

5. Evaluate how Angelou's stories have influenced conversations about intersectionality, empowerment, and identity.

Hypothesis:

1. Maya Angelou's autobiography, influenced by her trauma, contributes to black feminist discourse by promoting resilience and self-empowerment among black women.
2. Angelou's autobiography explores the intersection of race, gender, and class, aiming to empower black women within the feminist discourse.
3. Maya Angelou's linguistic choices significantly contribute to the empowerment of black women and a thorough analysis of language patterns, metaphors, and symbols can reveal their effective communication.
4. Maya Angelou's autobiographical narrative, shaped by her cultural and historical contexts, effectively empowers black women in the socio-political landscape of her time.

Research Methodology

The research methodology will be qualitative, interpretive and analytical. Moreover, it will include primary and secondary sources. Qualitative research methodology will help with a detailed exploration of the text. Interpretive research methodology will help to understand the multiple perspectives within the text and analytical research methodology will help to identify patterns, themes, and trends within the novel.

The MLA Handbook of Research, 9th edition, will be strictly followed.

Research Coverage

Five autobiographies of Maya Angelou have been selected for this research. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together in My Name, The Heart of a Woman, All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, A Song Flung Up to Heaven,* and some other related sources will be included from online and offline journals, articles and research work.

Scope and Limitations

The proposed research work is entitled **Echoes of Empowerment: Maya Angelou's Autobiographical Evolution in Black Feminist Discourse.** It chiefly concentrates on the exploration that delves into how Angelou's autobiographical journey aligns with and contributes to black feminist thought. It examines the impact of her narratives on shaping conversations around empowerment, representation, and social justice for black women. As far as the present research work is concerned, it goes through only five autobiographies of Maya Angelou. The research is primarily concerned with Angelou's autobiographical writing, the rest of the autobiographies will be excluded and may not address her poetry, essays, or fictional works in significant detail.

Contribution to the Field

The present study would help to create social awareness about the humiliation of African American women and will provide insights into the struggles and achievements of black women throughout history. It can be a path to personal growth and self-awareness, fostering empathy and a broader understanding of the human experience. Exploring this topic will help to recognize the commonalities and differences. This can inspire and uplift readers, encouraging them to face challenges with determination. Through representation, empowerment and resilience, intersectional understanding, support for education and empowerment initiatives, advocacy, and social change, research on Maya Angelou's work can boost the status of women everywhere. Research in this area can deepen our understanding of the complex ways in which various forms of oppression intersect and impact women’s lives differently based on their intersecting identities. This understanding can inform more inclusive and effective strategies for advancing gender equality worldwide. Through her poetry, essays, and activism, Maya Angelou advocated for social justice and equality. By highlighting the struggles faced by women, particularly those from marginalized communities, Angelou's work

can motivate individuals and organizations to work towards creating a more just and equitable society for all. This increased understanding can promote solidarity and cooperation among women globally, leading to stronger movements for gender equality and women's rights.

Work Plan/ Tentative Chapterization

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Early Influences and Childhood

Chapter 3: Navigating Womanhood: Black Feminism and Self-Discovery

Chapter 4: Civil Rights Movement and Activism

Chapter 5: Reception, Impact, and Legacy

Chapter 6: Conclusion

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